

A Midnight Tour

AMONGST

THE COMMON LODGING HOUSES

IN THE

Borough of Wakefield.

PRINTED FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION

Segnius irritant animos demissa per aures
Quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus.

HOR. ARS POET.

1870.

Very
Scarce

J. C. Hannum

A Midnight Tarry

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THE COMMON LODGING HOUSES

IN THE

Borough of Wakefield.

[By Alfred W. STANFIELD.]

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Quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus.

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A MIDNIGHT TOUR

AMONGST

THE COMMON LODGING HOUSES.

The Mayor of my native town, with a true appreciation of the responsibility of his office, had for some time been desirous of ascertaining by personal inspection the character of the accommodation afforded by our Common Lodging Houses. It must not be forgotten that these houses receive not only the waifs and strays of society, but also—which is still more important—the respectable workman and his family on tramp in search of work. The object of the Mayor's anxiety was therefore doubly interesting, and I fully sympathised with his views. An appointment was accordingly arranged, and the result was that I found myself during the course of last July issuing at a late hour in the evening from my own door. The night was singularly unpropitious; it was dreadfully dark, and the rain was falling in torrents. My first object was to call on the Mayor, who had invited a mutual friend to join us, and we then wended our way to the Police Office. Here the Chief Constable awaited us, and at eleven o'clock precisely we set out on our round, our party consisting of the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor, myself, and the Chief Constable of the borough, escorted by a stalwart, intelligent policeman, in uniform, and carrying his lantern.

We first visited one of the lowest quarters of the town, another St. Giles', where narrow streets and squalid inhabitants vie with each other which can be the dirtier. The night being so wet, few persons were stirring in the streets, and carefully picking our steps through the pools of water which the rain had everywhere made, we arrived at a large house in —— Street, and walked in through the open door. The landlady, as I will call her, though this title is more appropriate when applied to the keeper of a licensed house, hearing the sound of our footsteps in the passage, came out, and, on the Chief Constable telling her we wished to see over the house, at once lighted a candle and showed us the way into the kitchen. Here a number of men and women were either standing talking round the fire or were seated on the benches about the room. One of the men civilly wished us "good night," and they all looked with some surprise at the police. As our principal object was to see the sleeping-rooms, we stopped only long enough to glance round, and then turned to go upstairs. The landlord had now joined his spouse, and both were awaiting us. Going upstairs, preceded by the said landlord, (a stout burly fellow, who evidently lived in clover,) we came to the first sleeping-room. Here, stretched on small beds, each containing two sleepers, and placed within a very short distance of each other, were a number of men sleeping in every variety of attitude. These beds are let out as a rule at 6d. per night for the whole bed, or 3d. per night for the half. This includes the use of the common room, and the fire for cooking purposes for the following day. At night, if the lodger be low in funds, and cannot

pay for a second night's bed, he is turned out into the streets. Each lodger must provide his own soap and candle.

The poet who said "Misery makes a man acquainted with strange bedfellows" must have had a scene like this in his mind's eye. The coarse, and in too many cases, brutal, faces, distorted by sleep, looked wierd and ghastly in the dim light of the candle. Some of the sleepers were evidently in a state of drunken stupor.*

The air in the room, even at this early period of the night, smelt close and offensive, and we gladly proceeded to the next room, appropriated solely to the use of married people. Here, a similar scene presented itself, with this difference, that one of the occupants of each bed was a female. In one bed, in an adjoining room, a father, mother, and two children, were crowded together, but this was the only instance of overcrowding noticed in this house, although the beds were so small that they would scarcely accommodate two persons with any comfort. The Chief Constable amused us by the cool manner in which he awoke some of the sleepers, and demanded their names. But, even in the surprise of being thus awaked, the instinct of those of the vagrant class did not desert them. Fancy, my reader, being aroused from your first sleep, and finding the bull's eye of a policeman's lantern streaming on you, his helmet towering in the gloom by your bedside, catching the indistinct outline of more behind, and hearing your name demanded in a stern and authoritative voice. You would, doubtless, feel all at sea for some little time. But

* Singularly enough, both here and throughout our tour, we did not hear any snoring, so that night was not made more horrible by a nasal accompaniment.

some of those whom the Chief Constable so unceremoniously disturbed, simply rubbed their eyes, and in true tramp style promptly repeated his question : " What's my name ? " When asked, " Where do you come from ? " they answered, " Staffordshire ; " " Ireland ; " or any other place that was large enough ; always making some reply that would give no more than a vague and indefinite idea of the locality they hailed from. After answering the questions of the Chief Constable they were asleep again in a moment.

Passing through several rooms, each filled with tired sleepers, all of whom were closely scrutinised by the Chief Constable, we descended into the street again, and found the rain still pouring down. On comparing notes, we agreed that, except as regards the ventilation, our impression of this Lodging House was tolerably good. The bedrooms were cleanly whitewashed, and the iron bedsteads could harbour nothing objectionable ;—into the condition of the mattresses and bedclothes we did not inquire.

We next visited a house in —— Street, with a large building behind that had evidently been at some time a warehouse. Climbing up a common wooden ladder, so steep that any drunken lodger, getting up in the night, and trying to descend, would infallibly fall down and break his neck, we ascended to the sleeping-room. Here, the same close array of bedsteads presented itself, but the arrangements were more objectionable than in the house previously visited ; for the married couples were separated from the single men only by a screen of cotton. The air was also very impure. Most of the sleepers here, when questioned by the Chief Constable, said they were belong-

ing to the "Dobby Horses" in the Fair which was taking place just at this time in our town.

The next house, situated in —— Street, was a very small one, kept by an old woman as dirty as she was old. The kitchen, into which we entered, presented an indescribable scene of dirt and confusion. Coals scattered all over the floor, and a peggy-tub at the top of a pile of furniture, reminded one of a miniature barricade. The coals had been swept off a shelf in a cupboard underneath a larger one, to make room for a dilapidated mattress, which, having been used upstairs until it would scarcely hang together, was stuffed into this receptacle to do duty as a bed for juveniles. This novel bedroom was scarcely two feet high, and was pointed out to us as the sleeping place of a small boy.

Our way now took us to a German House, in —— Street. Here, a drunken German would persist in getting up, and it required all the persuasive efforts of the landlady to induce him to be quiet and lie down. This house is kept by an Englishwoman, who has married a native of the Fatherland, and who is accordingly visited by all the German bands that come into the town. We were not informed, whether, when they are low in funds, he gives them bed and supper in return for some of that national music which has made them almost as popular as barrel-organs in every town in England! This house was very clean but badly ventilated.

In succession we visited several more houses in —— Streets; and in almost all these we found an utter disregard of the commonest decencies of life. Married couples were sleeping in beds so close to each other that a hand

stretched out from one bed would reach the next. Beds in these rooms were occupied by women whose husbands were said to be coming from some neighbouring town ; and married men were found similarly expecting their partners in life. Single girls, some of them very young, were sleeping in the same rooms with married couples. The beds, in almost all cases, were much too close together. Shake-downs on the floor were found in some of the houses ; but it is fair to state that this was explained to be only temporary in consequence of the fair-time. Nowhere did we see, so far as I can remember, any separate accomodation for single women. These have to sleep, even in the more respectable houses, in the same rooms as the married couples ; and what they do in the lower class of houses I am afraid even to hint at.

I purposely abstain from entering into a description of the accommodation (or rather the want of it) for purposes of decency. This is lamentably deficient everywhere.

In one of the houses we saw that an attempt had been made towards a better state of things. Between each bed, and stretched from the pillars of the old four-posters, was a screen of drapery. Worn out it is true, faded, ragged, and dirty, but still an evidence of that womanly delicacy which appears nowhere to greater advantage than amidst surrounding impurity. In almost every house the ventilation was defective ; and, if this were the case at the comparatively early hour of the night when we visited the rooms, no doubt, as the night grew older, the small, low, and overcrowded rooms would become more and more insufferably close and frightfully unhealthy. In one of these bed-

rooms the family bread-pot was kept. I suppose that the mistress of the house considered the flavour of the bread would be improved by a tainted atmosphere around it.

We next directed our steps towards a very old building, in —— Street, used as a Lodging House. Our nostrils on entering told us that the drainage here is very bad. In all the houses we had been into, the air in the sleeping-rooms was impure and foetid, but here the house seemed planted over a drain, from which a noxious effluvium penetrated the whole dwelling. The sleeping-rooms here were very old; the ceilings low; the walls dilapidated; and the closet-like bedrooms were approached by shaky steps and tumble-down doors.*

The next house in —— Street smelt quite as offensively as the preceding one, and was of the same character, though the remains of elaborate moulding on the ceiling and above the fireplace told that it once had some pretensions to a better state of things than the present. Now all was dirt, stench and discomfort. In one of the rooms of this house, the Mayor, who wore a long light-coloured mackintosh extending to his heels, was jocularly asked by a young couple in bed, if "he was the parson, come to marry them?"

Still on we went, visiting more houses, toiling up more shaky, break-neck stairs, and everywhere breathing the same stifling air, reeking of overcrowded, unwashed bodies.

* We found many single women in these houses. Of those who had not yet gone to bed we asked their vocation. With one exception, they all said they hawked pins and needles. This exception sold crochet, but had none at all to produce. All the men said they hawked nuts. What lucrative businesses! Pins and Nut hawking must be if they really afford subsistence for so many!

The facilities for washing were everywhere painfully small. In one house we visited, only one towel was provided for about thirty lodgers, and they could get no more, even by the most pertinacious appeals. One was the allowance, and one was all they could get. At the top of the stairs in another house, a small unhealthy looking man, with a villainous expression, looked over the banisters as we ascended, and greeted us with the most dreadful language. Apparently, he had some great woe with which he associated us ; and he cursed us in a manner that made our blood run cold. I am told it is customary for the landlord or keeper to pair off the single men for the night, and thus they sometimes find themselves with queer bed-mates.

We next went down a large open court out of _____ Street, where we found two Lodging Houses. One had no lodgers, so we did not go in. At the other, after many loud knockings and shoutings, the police managed to arouse the keeper, who came to the door winking and blinking, and making a thousand apologies for keeping us waiting. In one room, at this house, there were only shake-downs on the floor. On being remonstrated with for this, he said he had cleared out all the bedsteads, because he was intending to have a thorough cleaning. These rooms needed this much, for cobwebs hung about in thick profusion ; and I wondered if the spiders ever crawled into the open mouths of the sleepers to get a sniff of the savory, hot suppers, in which tramps are popularly supposed to indulge. The Chief Constable told us the following story of this lodging house keeper. About four o'clock in the

morning he knocked at the door of the Police Station, and told the Police Constable who answered his knock that he wanted to see his chief. The Chief Constable accordingly came, and the following dialogue took place:—

Chief Constable : Well ! what's the matter ?

Lodging House Keeper : Shure and I don't know, surr.

Chief Constable : What have you come here for then ?

Lodging House Keeper : Shure and I have got a lodger.

Chief Constable : Well, what's the matter with him ?

Is he dead ?

Lodging House Keeper : Shure and I believe he is, surr.

Chief Constable : Why didn't you fetch the doctor to him ?

Lodging House Keeper : Shure and you wouldn't fetch the doctor to a drunken man !

The Chief Constable, anxious to investigate the affair, went with this son of the Emerald Isle to his house ; and found upstairs the body of a fine, well-built young man, stretched on the floor, and quite dead. It appeared, on enquiry, that the young man was a regular lodger. When in a half-drunken state the previous night, he had been fighting in the yard, had been knocked down, and as he remained insensible, had been carried upstairs by his landlord, and there left to die, unthought of and uncared for.

We next dived into that remotest purlieue of the town which bears the name of ———. Unenviable as is the name, its character is still worse. Here, house after house vied with each other as to which could best attract the lower class of vagrants by dirty and dilapidated grimness. The pavement of this part of the town is not kept in such

good order as might have been expected from a spirited Corporation like ours. I went over boot tops in a puddle in the causeway ; and found it was necessary to have the bull's eye of the Police Constable's lantern to prevent a recurrence of this disaster. In going from room to room in the houses here, all alike low, dirty, and smelling intolerably offensive, we noticed the significant fact that all the clothes of the sleepers were hung on lines of stout cord stretched across the rooms. The lodgers themselves slept *in naturalibus*. This was done to prevent carrying any of their co-lodgers away with them in the morning. In these houses were some miserably small rooms ; quite unfit for sleeping-rooms for human beings. As I peered into some of them I wondered if ventilation was a thing known or cared about by the frequenters of these houses. Did any one of them, with more refined feelings than the rest, ever ask beforehand to be shown the room he would have to sleep in, and select the airiest bed he could get ? Or did they go to sleep like so many pigs in the places they were put into ? I fancy a man with any disposition for a choice of beds would be a *lusus naturæ* in this locality.

I have seen it stated that the lodgers, in even the worst of these habitations, for the most part sleep soundly. But they have, in all probability, been out in the open air the whole of the day, and as most of them have walked many miles, they are for the most part exceedingly fatigued. Besides this, some of them are half drunk. "Why, in course, sir," said a "traveller" whom I spoke to on this subject, "if you is in a country town or village, where there's only one lodging house, perhaps, and that a bad one—an old

hand can always suit his-self in London—you must get half drunk, or your money for your bed is wasted. There's so much rest owing to you after a hard day ; and bugs and bad air'll prevent it's being paid if you don't lay in some stock of beer, or liquor of some sort, to sleep on. It's a duty you owes yourself ; but if you have'nt the browns, why, then in course, you can't pay it." *

But there were, nevertheless, incidents which relieved the general gloom. In one of these houses the noise of our entrance awoke a woman whose features showed that she had not always slept in such a scene. Fearful for the child quietly sleeping by her side, she snatched it to her breast with true maternal solicitude, and imprinted an impassioned kiss upon its cheek. A mother's heart is always the same, no matter whether it beats beneath satin or rags. In the same house the Chief Constable thought he saw a man he "wanted," fast asleep with his wife in the far corner of the room, and attempted to awake him. But no amount of shaking, no number of lusty slaps, could arouse him from the arms of Morpheus. Perhaps he had his own reasons for not coming back from the land of dreams. At last, wearied with his unavailing efforts, the Chief Constable desisted, and asked the wife several questions, which apparently satisfied him, for he left the sleeper and rejoined us.

From this place we crossed a considerable part of the town ; and arrived at more narrow streets, where were more Lodging Houses. These we also visited ; but they contained nothing different from what has been already

* Henry Mayhew.

described, and I therefore refrain from wearying the reader with an account of them. The same objectionable characteristics appeared in all.

In only one of the Lodging Houses did we find that separate rooms could be had by anyone willing to pay extra for privacy. In one or two of the houses, there were certainly places—I will not call them bedrooms—with only one bed in them; but they were all small passages from one room to another, and the occupants (whether married couples or single women,) when they retired for the night had to fasten both doors; and thus they are bottled up, without any aperture for the admission of air. They are also liable to intrusion at any moment by the occupants of the room beyond, who may be late to bed, or want to make their exit early in the morning.

And now, to sum up the whole, and “point the moral of my tale:” for my readers will rightly judge that I have some purpose in placing before them an account of our ramble. That purpose is to endeavour to increase their interest in those fellow-creatures who frequent the little world I have imperfectly attempted to describe, by giving a faithful account of what is passing but a few steps from their own doors. Nor do I only desire to awaken a sentimental but unfruitful feeling of mere sympathy. I wish to enquire whether any practical improvement can be brought about. Is there no way of preventing the rapid and inevitable result which must follow this frightful and unhealthy overcrowding of what Mr. Bright calls the “residuum?” Is there to be no limit to this dreadful commingling of different sexes, and the consequent decay of

morality? Possibly it may be replied that there are stringent laws to compel Lodging House Keepers to adopt such rules as would prevent the most flagrant excesses we observed in our visits, and that informations should be laid against the offending Keepers. This course would, doubtless, be beneficial for a time, but would scarcely strike at the root of the evil, unless a constant and most vigilant surveillance, quite beyond the numerical power of our present Police Force, were enforced. One night's overcrowding might cause irreparable mischief. The fault of the system does not, in my opinion, lie so much with the landlords of the Lodging Houses, who, in most instances, do the best they can with the buildings they can rent for this purpose, as in the fact that suitable tenements are not to be had for Lodging Houses. Most of those we visited are only cottages converted to this purpose. But whatever may be the cause of the present condition of affairs, surely it is our business to endeavour to amend it in any way which seems open to us. As citizens of Wakefield we ought to watch over the honest strangers of the working class and their families, and we should see that they are not exposed to the temptations which often, far too often, await them in the Lodging Houses of our borough. The tramp proper will always frequent the lowest class of Lodging House, because there he meets his "pals" with whom he can plot and arrange the next day's campaign undisturbed; and there he can get the peculiar information so necessary to success in his calling. But for the respectable working-man and his family I feel persuaded that a Model Lodging House, with proper accommodation for purposes of decency,

would be a great boon to Wakefield and productive of infinite good.

Therefore, I invite the attention of the philanthropic and benevolent to the necessity of erecting a Model Lodging House, such as those that are established in many of the neighbouring towns. Nor would it be necessarily unremunerative. The landlords of most of the Lodging Houses seem thriving, well-to-do men. Although they pay high rents, they make on an average 5s. or 6s., or even more than this, per night, in addition to pursuing their ordinary avocations during the day; and it will be, therefore, at once seen that their calling is by no means an unprofitable one. If I be successful, I shall not regret penning this slight account of our midnight ramble, during three hours of incessant rain, amongst some of the most wretched dens in the town; and from which we owe thanks to the care and civility of the police that we emerged safely, and without molestation.

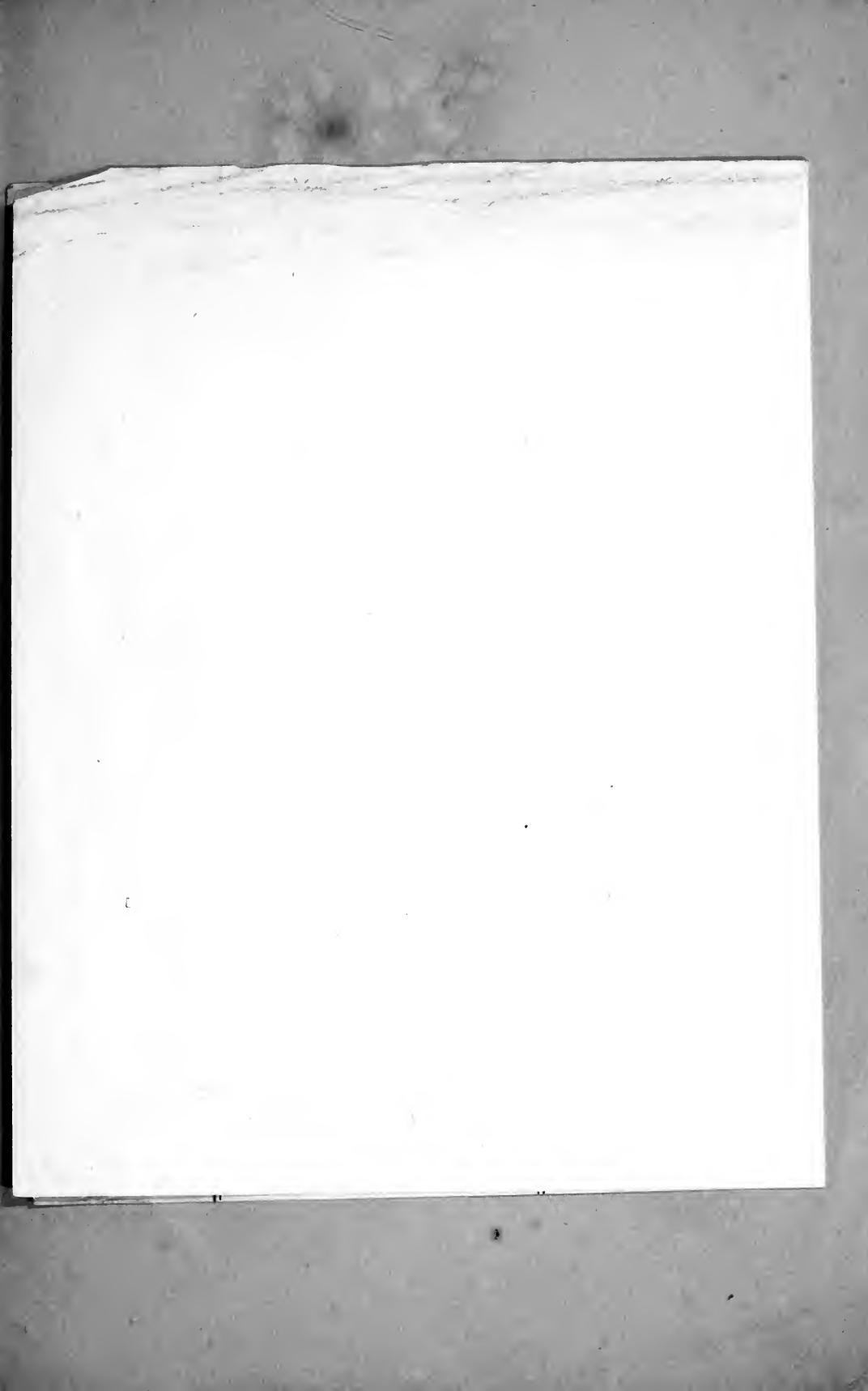
A P P E N D I X .

THE following Report of the "Bradford Model Lodging House Company, Limited," shows that a Model Lodging House, in addition to its great usefulness, is also not unremunerative :—

At a Meeting of this Company, held at the Registered Offices, on Wednesday, December 29th, 1869, Charles Semon, Esq., in the chair, the following Report was read and adopted :—

"The directors have great pleasure in submitting to the shareholders the third annual report of this institution, particularly because the report is so encouraging to all who have taken an interest in that which at first seemed an uncertain and novel undertaking in Bradford. The institution having now been three years in full working order, it is gratifying to find that every year has witnessed an increase of accommodation given, and this last year's return shows that the institution has not been able to meet the demands made upon its accommodation. It will be remembered that this institution was formed from philanthropic motives, but such has been its success hitherto, that the directors have been able to declare a dividend of five per cent., and to form a reserve fund for renewals and contingencies. The past year's accounts show that the directors can again recommend a payment of five per cent., and place £30 to the reserve fund. It may be interesting to the shareholders to know that not less than 58,583 persons have been accommodated during the past twelve months, in comparison with 55,319 the previous year; and the directors wish particularly to draw the attention of the shareholders to the fact that over 5,400 persons have been refused accommodation on account of want of room during the last twelve months. This last fact has made your directors consider whether the question is not now ripe for discussion as to the desirability of extending the benefits and usefulness of their institution in another portion of the town. The directors are





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